



# ACOM



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Language

Armenian Cultural Organization of Minnesota  
Established 1980

No. 148 Special Edition

## MinneHyeLites

# Armenian Genocide Commemoration Special Edition



## INTRODUCTION OF THE KEYNOTE SPEAKER BY AZAD MESROBIAN

It is indeed a memorable day for me to introduce our keynote speaker Mr. Zaven Khanjian. He has been my best friend since my kindergarten days in Aleppo, Syria. We attended Sunday school at Immanuel Evangelical Church and graduated together from Aleppo Junior College.



We lived across the river from each other: he in Azizia section and I near his wife Sona in Sulemanieh. He used to visit me under the pretext of studying but it was a very short study as this was a cover to see his first and only girlfriend. Sona has been his backbone and constant companion making sure that he is not stressed out and well taken care of.

Upon graduation from Aleppo College, Zaven attend AUB and received his Bachelor's degree in Business Administration. Then he sought his fortune in the Persian Gulf for 13 years while I was plucking dollars from trees in South Dakota and MN. He returned to set roots in Beirut, Lebanon, only to see the civil war shatter his plans. He decided to immigrate to the West Coast where he established a successful real estate business in Glendale, CA.

This is his second trip to MN. The first one was some forty years ago when he visited our family with his four or five-year old son.

Fridley MN. I remember to this day, after coming from the deserts of the Persian Gulf, his first son Vasken playing in a small sand box with my daughter Kristin.

Zaven and Sona have two sons and a daughter. The all live in the West Coast and have six grandchildren. The youngest was just born two months ago and is the first granddaughter.

While most of us, when we reach the age of 62-65, we set our sails to the safety of the shore and enjoy some stress-free life, not Zaven. He decided to accept the very important position of Executive Director and CEO of AMAA. A Philan-

thropic organization established in Paramus, NJ, to help the survivors of the Armenian Genocide. My father and his two brothers were taken to an AMAA orphanage in Aleppo established by reverend Aharon Cherajian. I owe my final years at Aleppo College to a scholarship from Philibosian foundation of AMAA. I'm sure he will talk about the

activities of this fine organization.

Zaven travels the world establishing Armenian School and Churches. Meeting our leaders from the President of Armenian and both Catholicos' in Yerevan and Beirut as well as the Archbishops of the Eastern and Western Dioceses in USA.

Zaven has been an active member of Greater Los Angeles community serving in leadership capacities, Chairman of The Armenian Fund West Coast, a founding father of Merdinian Armenian Evangelical High School. He serves on the board of Haigazian University of Beirut, and founded the Syrian Armenian Relief Fund which has raised over one million dollars.

Mr. Khanjian has contributed volumes of bilingual articles to American and Armenian media and authored three books in Armenian. He refuses to translate so that I would return to my roots and re-learn my mother language. I love the cover picture of his first book. It shows him knocking at his grandfather's and father's home in Turkey. The title of the book is a question mark "is this your home or mine?" His second book is titled "Arachin Gayaran" Haleb. Meaning First Station "Haleb". In which he talks about his upbringing and meeting his wife and his studying habits with me in Aleppo.

My fellow Armenians, friends and distinguished guests please welcome Mr. Zaven Khanjian.



## KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY ZAVEN KHANJIAN

Two years ago and on April 24, 2015, the world, well, the world that orbits around us, commemorated the Centennial of the Armenian Genocide.

Today is April 24, 2017

Collectively, humanity has surrendered two more years to the whirlpool of history.

It was a solemn occasion, a distinct anniversary. An occasion to relive the anguish and yet rejoice the miracle of survival. An anniversary that stirred both sorrow and pride in our collective soul.

Justifiably, and following the poet's example, we can and ought to ask ourselves.

Յաշուէյարդար, ինչ մնաց, կեանքէն ինծի ինչ մնաց:

'To sum it up, what remains? From the Centennial, what remains?'

I want to start sharing a personal story, which will be a prelude to our expectations, aspirations and dreams emanating from our struggle for recognition of the Armenian Genocide and quest for justice.

You have probably heard of Armen Aroyan, a prominent member of the Southern California Armenian community. Armen Aroyan earned his fame during the past three decades since he pioneered to lead hundreds of Armenians from all over the world and in particular, the United States to visit their ancestral homeland in occupied historic Armenia.

Two of my sisters and brother took this pilgrimage back to their roots in the early 90s.

At the time, I was not yet ready. For a long time I did not have the predisposition and psychological maturity to confront the people and the country which stopped the clock on the lives of my two grandfathers, half my nation and most of my historical fatherland in their attempted Genocide of 1915.

My sister Laura took her trip to her ancestral home in September 1994. On a hillside in Agin, a village in the outskirts of Arapkir sit two homes



one across the other. They belong to my paternal and maternal grandfathers. My father was born in one of these homes a few years before the 'Yeghern' started. Aroyan has taken many of his guests who visit the area to drive by the street and has talked to them about the Khanjian heritage. Not everyone is privileged to enter the house. My sister

however, not only had the opportunity but the right to be there and she was not deprived. During the tour, the matriarch of the family, a woman of my father's age and generation, who personally knew my father and had hosted him in the house on two occasions in the 50s and 60s, points to a room in the house and invites my sister in.

My father was born in that room.

Entering the room, praying, sobbing, touching and talking to the walls, my sister would have thought her pilgrimage had culminated.

However, there was more in store for her.

As she gets ready to leave, the matriarch gathers her family around her and instructs.

'Anytime this lady or one of her siblings visit the house, you welcome them with dignity and respect and treat them like the owners of the house'

In 2006, it was my turn. My wife and I took our pilgrimage to our roots.

Before taking the trip, Sona and I wondered as to how we could make the pilgrimage to the land, to the parental home, significant and memorable. How can we honor and memorialize my two grandfathers, brutally killed on this soil; my father, resting in a foreign soil with the longing and love of Agin and all those who were martyred for the sin of having been born Armenian. We contemplated, concluded and planned to plant a tree, a walnut tree, in the backyard of my paternal grandfather's home where my father was born. A walnut tree will live long, develop, grow and flourish. It will provide shade and shel-

ter to those living under it. It will be strong, firm and a long-lived providing fruit for years unknown. All that to immortalize the sacred sacrament of the renowned poet Levon Zaven Surlmelian who penned

«Մեռելներուս իբրեւ խաչ՝ եւ այս ծառը տնկեցի»

“As a cross for my departed, I planted this tree”

Walking up a hill, Aroyan leads us to the house. In my haste, I find myself leading the group with the walnut sapling in my hand. I notice an adult man on the balcony who is the son of the matriarch my sister had met earlier. I salute him in my broken Turkish and without waiting for his welcoming words enter the house and walk up the stairs to the upper floor. Restless and uncomfortable, I introduce myself to the ‘owner’ and immediately realize that he knows me well, he knows my father and the whole Khanjian clan. He describes in detail my father’s second visit to Agin in 1969 when he was a boy of thirteen. He talks about the Khanjians, Armenian Turkish relationship, the ‘exodus’ of the Armenians. He talks about his profession, his father and recites how his father had acquired the house. He talks about his mother my sister had met in 1994 and says she died in 1998. Evidently, faithful to her mother’s commandment, Hussain, that was his name, affirms that we could be his guests in the house anytime and for as long as we desire. All the while, he is following me in my emotional walk through the house. Suddenly, he approaches me, and throwing an arm on my shoulder, I wonder out of guilt or anxiety, asks me in an easily understood Turkish.

“Now tell me, IS THIS YOUR HOUSE OR MINE?”

I feel a blow on my head. A cold sweat covers my face. I did not answer. Instead, with a forced smile and pointing to the walnut sapling placed on the table, I said:

I have a gift for you where shall we plant it.

Hussain and I plant the tree; the late Serpazan Arch. Datev Gharibian of Brazil blesses it following Surlmelian’s prayer.

“Lord, bless this tender tree. Here I plant it

In the crumbly and black soil where my ancestors are lain”

We leave with Hussain’s question lingering in my head. “Is This Your House or Mine?”

I wrote a book about our pilgrimage and you guessed it the title was.

“Is This House Yours or Mine?”

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Dr. Taner Akçam, the Turkish Historian who currently holds the Kaloosdian–Mugar Chair of Armenian Genocide Studies at Clarke University, is one of the foremost proponents of dialogue between Armenians and Turks. At a lecture in Toronto on May 25, 2001, where the Zoryan Institute launched Akçam’s publication titled, “Dialogue Across International Divide: Essays Towards a Turkish-Armenian Dialogue” (He has since published several books covering the Armenian Genocide) he explains:

“Someone looking at me sees only one person, but I represent the tip of the iceberg of those involved in the process, who are seeking an open society in Turkey. I am a product of this process in Turkey and I am not alone” “Civil society in Turkey knows that without coming to terms with history, we cannot build a democracy in Turkey” “Not only we should remember history, but actually to institutionalize remembering is essential for the process of democratization”

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Two years after the Centennial, we are gathered here tonight to commemorate the anniversary of the Genocide.

What do we want today?

Two years ago, we poured in our hearts and commemorated the Centennial.

So going back to Vahan Tekeyan, we ask ourselves:

‘To sum it up, what remains? From the Centennial, what remains?’

It should be jubilantly acknowledged that we worked hard and can confidently claim a degree of reward and victory. The Centennial raised our national struggle to an unprecedented plateau of universal awareness, respect and recognition that the cause and powerful in its impact. Intangible victories may be, but nevertheless a firm foundation upon which we can (and should) con-

tinuously build.

The inevitable and hard question to ask is – what comes next?

The path is still long and thorny, the obstacles and hindrances many. However, the collective will and determination is in place and our resolute faith in our just struggle is unshakable. God is the foundation of our quest for justice and the recognition of the truth. We need not sit idle in acquiescence. The struggle continues.

Despite the many achievements and victories, we have not gained much on the road of reparations, restitutions and recognition from the heirs of the perpetrators. All recognition, sympathy and acknowledgment in the civilized world have come with impunity without legal muscle. The heirs of the perpetrators still lie in a deep coma of self-denial. Adding insult to injury, the ‘civilized’ world, with total acquiescence, turned a blind eye to the continuing crime committed by the same perpetrator in Syria. The institutionalization of remembrance and the move towards democratization in Turkey that Taner Akcam was talking about in 2001 remains hostage in 2017 to the infamous Article 301 of the Turkish penal code which criminalizes any and all remembrance of the Genocide. And despite the goodwill of a mountain of Turkish or Kurdish intellectuals involved in the process and seeking an open society in Turkey, Hrant Dink was murdered by the Deep State in Turkey and ten years after his martyrdom his trial has still not exposed the masters behind the hired assassin, 17 year old Ogun Samast. Erdogan remains on a fast pace of amending the constitution pulling Turkey behind and creating an autocratic regime with most powers centralized in the hands of ‘sultan’ Erdogan.

In the face of all these challenges from the East and the hegemony, hypocrisy and double standards of the West we can only depend on ourselves. The realization of our quest for justice remains solely on our selfless and sacrificial devotion and commitment to the application of Khrimian Hayrig’s ‘iron ladle’. was worthy of

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Over the span of time and under the effect of various conditions and circumstances, which in-

fluence our national path, our priorities, focus and agendas, should justifiably remain flexible and malleable. Our collective psyche cannot and should not remain hostage to the fetters of the Genocide. Therefore, until that promised dawn when our collective national soul is able to bring the iron ladle home without any impediment or procrastination we have to focus on the following essential priorities.

#### A. Homeland

In 2016, Armenia celebrated the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of independence. Despite the fact that we had no input in the realization of our collective dream; despite the fact that we were even confused for a while; we were jubilant. We had our place in the league of nations. We raised our heads in dignity and pride and saluted the tricolor. We built a nation and created a country from the ashes of the Soviet system. We bore the shock therapy of moving from a very centralized socialist economy to a radical capitalist system, from an atheist system that persecuted believers, to a society, which created an unprecedented opportunity to resurrect the faith of our fathers in the land of a nation, which embraced Christianity in 301 AD. We fought a liberation war in Artsakh, and at the cost of thousands of martyred lives, enormous economic sacrifices and a faithful and supportive diaspora we were able to win the war.

Twenty-five years after independence, we are not where we wanted to be. The road has not been rosy as our homeland continues to face the challenges of tumultuous times. Having won a liberation war, we failed to win the peace and continue to face an aggressive enemy whose consistent breaches of a shaky ceasefire has reaped the lives of hundreds of young conscripts defending our borders, and countless civilians peacefully living on their land. An enemy, whose behavior continues to obstruct scores of development projects so vital for the economy of the area. Our Homeland continues to experience skyrocketing unemployment, extreme poverty, economic paralysis, mass migration, the rise of oligarchs and widespread corruption.

We have not and should not lose faith. Our vision of the new citizen in the Homeland is one

of indelible integrity, who upholds the highest values and earns an unblemished reputation. One who advocates social justice, freedom of conscience, expression or speech; a citizen who exercises voluntarism, sustains society, respects human rights and sacrifices for the Homeland; a citizen who respects the law and equal rights of others under the law; a citizen who loves the Lord and reflects His love. These are fundamental prerequisites of the concrete foundation of a strong, self-sustained, proud developing democracy, ripe for a growing economy that will create a new, creative and happy society and a strong army capable to defend its borders. There lies the hope of the promised 'iron ladle' in the Homeland.

### B. Diaspora

Centuries of persecution, invasion, aggression, discrimination, usurpation and successive massacres have created waves of exodus from our historic homeland resulting in the Armenian Diaspora. The 1915 Genocide was the culmination of all, dispersing the remnants of the survivors all over the world. Independence brought the hope of a shrinking Diaspora but the reality on the ground came to expand the Armenian Diaspora because of the exodus from the Homeland. The story of the Diaspora is not the subject of the day. However, it is essential to recognize the realities of an expanding Diaspora in terms of its struggle to perpetuate (զոյապահպանել) and enormous potential to assist the Homeland.

In order to achieve that desired role we have to attain a healthy and prosperous Diaspora. The reality on the ground here too seems to be short of the aspired.

For many decades after the Genocide, the throbbing heart of the Armenian Diaspora remained to be the communities of the Middle East. Active, thriving, energetic, industrious and spirited communities remained the beehive of Armenian culture and education, exporting able leadership in all realms of Armenian community life all over the globe. No more. The Achilles's Heel of the Armenia Diaspora remains the tragic situation in Syria. Five years of death and destruction has devastated the Mother Diaspora Community of Syria, dispersing its masses

across the region and beyond and diminishing its role and power potential. It is hard to shape an 'iron ladle' in the region.

Despite all the difficulties described above I see a new dawn rising on the horizon of the new Armenian Diaspora. What we came to witness on the Genocide Centennial and since then, has anchored an unwavering confidence in our youth, making us proud of their alertness, accomplishments, creativity, sense of belonging and sense of responsibility. A mental survey of our youth around the globe reveals that never before in the history of our nation have we had such an army of students in higher education who constitute contingents of potential professionals, scientists, educators, and prominent stars in the fields of science, art and public service ready to take charge of our communities. Are we molding an iron ladle? I do not know but I am optimistic.

With the strength gathered thru the legendary Kirk Kerkorian's "Promise"; Near East Foundation's "They Shall Not Perish" just aired on PBS; and the baby steps of the recently conceived Armenian American Museum in Glendale, California to give a few examples, we seem to be on the right path.

With a strong and truly democratic Homeland and a new Diaspora taking shape we vow to perpetuate the faith, the language, the culture and overcome evil with song and dance, hope and prayer, smiles and joy all for the Glory of God who said in Romans 12:19 "It is mine to avenge; I will repay"

Erdogan can dream of an Empire and hold tight to Article 301. However, the heirs of the Patriarch of Agin, her son Hussain, Taner Akcam and his fellow intellectuals will multiply and prevail.

God is faithful; He will deliver the Iron ladle.

Thank You

Zaven Khanjian

St. Paul, Minnesota

April 24, 2017

